

US Strategy and the Iran Strike

by George Friedman - April 15, 2024

The U.S. has adopted a national strategy designed to use force without risking casualties of its own. This strategy has been on full display in Ukraine, where Washington has played a significant and perhaps decisive role not by committing troops but by arming Ukrainian forces with weapons, using political signals and the potential of increased military presence to try to shape Russian action. The policy stands in stark contrast to the one adopted in Vietnam, where the U.S. absorbed massive casualties and incurred severe political repercussions domestically. The policies during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were variations of that strategy.

If we believed the Ukraine intervention was one of a kind, the events of this weekend perhaps suggest otherwise. Fearing Iranian intervention against its war on Hamas, Israel on April 1 launched missiles at an Iranian diplomatic compound in Damascus, killing two generals and five other senior officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Iran responded over the weekend by launching missiles and drones at Israeli targets. As of the time of writing, they seem to have inflicted very little damage, as Israel's multilayered missile defense system looks to have intercepted most of the projectiles. In other words, Israel did not necessarily need outside help in this episode.

Even so, the United States and the United Kingdom used naval assets armed with anti-missile systems to intercept Iranian missiles over Syria, Iraq and Jordan. At this time, there is no indication that Iran was targeting U.S. or British assets – or that the Israelis needed help. The most likely explanation is that it was a signal to Iran that the attack on Israel could invite U.S. and British intervention, albeit without troops on the ground. The U.S. has a long and unpleasant history with Iran, and it wanted to remind Tehran that it would face more than one enemy if it confronted Israel.

This is not a matter of the U.S. siding with Israel; it's a matter of threatening Iran. The Iranian nuclear project has concerned the U.S. for some time, as have Iran's attempts to reshape the region to its liking. The United States regards Iranian power as a threat to American interests. Israel may be an American ally, but the defense of Israel wasn't Washington's primary motivation. Its primary motivation was to deter expansionary behavior from Iran.

Washington's actions over the weekend, then, are in keeping with its desire not to deploy troops to a war with a highly motivated enemy fighting on its own turf. When a defender is both motivated and

reasonably well armed – as it was, say, in Vietnam – the U.S. is unable for strategic and political reasons to sustain indefinite conflict and casualties. Yet U.S. strategists deem it essential to show that the conflict is important to the United States and that it is prepared to shape the fighting accordingly – just not with boots on the ground.

Put differently, its strategy in the conflict in the Middle East is similar to the one it has pursued in Ukraine – strengthening its allies with powerful weapons while avoiding casualties. We now see something similar seeming to emerge in the Middle East. Just as the U.S. interest in Ukraine is less about Ukraine than about containing Russia, the U.S. intervention in the Middle East is less about simply supporting Israel than about containing Iran. Intercepting some Iranian missiles doesn't do much to increase Israel's defensive capability, but it does much to demonstrate U.S. intentions going forward.

Focusing on entering a war without taking massive casualties is, in a sense, a strategy that has been in place on a certain level for some time, but it is now becoming the core of American strategy. Its success depends on the strength and will of the enemy, and any miscalculation will force the U.S. to reconsider its stance or the forces it must use. I would normally see this as part of U.S. strategy, but in light of the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, I believe it to be the new normal not just for minor issues but also for the management of broader, longer-term challenges.

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